Love is A Many Splendored Thing
I John 4:13-21
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The trouble with trying to preach a sermon from a passage like that (I John 4:13-21) is that it is literally loaded with theological and ethical freight. There is a lot here - far more than can be articulated in one sermon. And so, as I worked through the text this week, I chose three ideas to discuss - three separate statements about the word "love". Each says something different about love - and yet they are bound together by the fact that they each begin with the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

The three statements are these:

- God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.
- There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.
- We love, because he first loved us.

Three statements - one strictly theological regarding the nature of God; and two containing very contemporary psychological and ethical relevance. Let's examine them more closely.

First, God is love. That means that when you talk about God, love is where you start. It means that love is not just one of many divine attributes, but the very essence of the divine. God is love. And everything else that is said about him is defined by the fact that essentially his nature is love. For instance, if we say that God is powerful, we need to understand that we are not talking abou raw, naked power - but powerful love. If we say that God is just - we need to understand that we're talking about a loving justice. God is love - and the final definition of that love - that God - is a lonely cross standing on a hill outside Jerusalem.

That love, the author of this little letter was saying, is the primal reality in the universe. Men have always looked into the darkness and wondered what is there. Some have felt a faceless power; some have felt an arbitrary fate; others have felt nothing. "Love is there", says this writer. Love is the final reality. And furthermore, a man who loves deeply is participating in the fundamental nature of things.

One commentator suggests that. . . "All deep human love strikes down somewhere into the divine, though it may strike darkly and with a dim feeling after Him who is not far from anyone." (Findlay in I, B) I think everyone of us has felt something like that, even though we are not able to find the words to express it.

A parent stands beside the crib of his sleeping child and feels something so powerful within him that he knows it is of God. A husband, a wife, feels sheer amazement at the fact that this one matters most in all the world. A Christian at Communion hears the words he has been listening to for years, and suddenly they are filled with meaning. These people - these friends and strangers; these ones I have worked with and argued with - these and all who have gone before - are one - and are given a unity by the very love of God.

To love is to drink deeply of the water of life. To love deeply is to do what you were created to do: it is to participate in the very essence of being a man.

God is love. That is the first statement and it undergirds all that follows. "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

For the author and the readers of the letter this statement had a dual relevance. They were gripped by two very real fears: the fear of judgment and the fear of persecution. In the first instance they fully expected the end of the age within their own life time. And naturally, there was more than a little fear involved with their anticipation of that event. But love casts out fear. Your judge is God and he is love, and he loves you and there is nothing to fear.

In the second instance, the era of Roman persecution was just beginning. The handwriting was on the wall. Very soon it would be dangerous

to be known as a Christian. Already men were being tortured and killed - all in all a rather frightful prospect. But love can cast out even that kind of immediate fear.

For us there is no immediate fear of persecution, nor is the fear of divine judgement the powerful force it once was. And yet fear remains as one of the notable characteristics of our particular generation.

We know that the human animal enters the world afraid of nothing except loud noises and falling. These are the only fears that are built-in; all the rest must be learned. Fear can be good or bad. As an early warning system the fear response prevents us from doing things which might prove to be self-destructive. Fear also has motivated men to remedy whatever environmental conditions caused it in the first place. Fear of floods motivates men to build dams and dikes and that, of course, is very healthy.

It was Sigmund Freud who described healthy and neurotic fear in terms of a man's attitude toward snakes. It is healthy, Freud noted, to be apprehensive about the possibility of being bitten by a snake while walking through the jungle. It is another thing altogether to wake up in the middle of the night to check for snakes under your bed.

Neurotic fear is usually linked with a childhood experience the psychiatrists call traumatic, and is best dealt with by the skilled understanding of a psychiatrist or psychologist. Sometimes, merely understanding the root of our fear is enough to banish it. Angelo Patri has noted that, "Education consists in being afraid at the right time."

But far beyond the personal level, in which it can be defined as either healthy or neurotic, fear operates on a broad sociological base and is one of the most powerful motivators known to man.

For instance, consider the use made of fear to motivate people in religion. It was said of Billy Sunday that on a good day his listeners could feel the very flames of hell burning around their seats. It is an operational maxim for the traveling evangelist that if he can frighten people badly enough they'll do what he wants - even to the point of making a "decision for Christ". The supreme irony is that this charade is then called a "Christian Conversion.," Of course, we are not involved with this sort of thing, and yet fear - in an unspoken way - does play a role in the religious motivation of all of us. Christianity, for many people, is little more than an eternal fire insurance policy. But. . ."there is no fear in love."

Or consider the use to which fear is put by the skillful politician. It is always astonishing to be reminded that Adolf Hitler was elected to office because of his extremely skillful use of fear. Students of political science were fascinated by the machinations of another great politician - Charles DeGaulle. When DeGaulle wanted something he would play his cards one by one, reserving his ace until the end. And without fail he would play it - an unadulterated appeal to fear. And for many years it worked.

Fear is probably the most important phenomenon in the world of politics in other nations and, unfortunately, in our own. Whenever the military decides it is time to overthrow the elected government of a nation, inevitably the fear of Communism is the rationale. And in our own nation - the far right wing has become a power to be reckoned with by peddling fear; fear of fluoride in the water, fear of sex education in the schools - fear of that sinister communist conspiracy the enlightened ones are able to see everywhere in our common life. Sometimes it is almost humorous until we remember the tremendous power of fear.

Fear is at the bottom of a lot of the things we are doing as a nation - and a lot of the tensions that currently afflict us. Fear breeds tension and then hatred. That maxim is documented in nearly all the external and internal problems we have.

We fear the Russians - we fear the Chinese even more. The Russians fear the Americans and the Chinese. The Chinese fear the Russians and Americans. And on all three sides this fear motivates a great deal of

what we do in the world - on all three sides our mutual fear has become the midwife of hatred. I think the greatest irony of our age is that we are spending nearly 80 billion dollars a year to soothe our fears and it's not working, and furthermore it's never going to work. Currently we are debating the relative merits of the A. B. M. Safeguard System, a system that will cost billions and billions of dollars with absolutely no assurance of efficiency whenever it is completed. But we'll probably do it anyway - because we're afraid - and we've been conditioned to cope with our fear by making the other side even more afraid than we are.

On a more modest level, we find ourselves on the long end of a growing generation gap - because we're afraid of what the campus radical is and what he is saying.

We find ourselves hating the homosexual because we fear the threat he poses to our own manhood or womanhood.

Most immediate of all, we find ourselves in a brand new racial climate - and this time we're afraid. It is one of the interesting anecdotes of our history that racial hatred has increased whenever the white man discovered he had some reason to be afraid. There was no need for the Ku Klux Klan so long as the black man was property. But a free black man - a free black man whose mother was brought here in a ship, and whose father was the plantation owner- is something else again.

Thus fear - and then hatred. For two hundred years Southern white men violated black women at will. And then as the conscience of the nation slowly awakened so did the fear that the black man would retaliate. When the civil rights marchers walked through Cicero, Illinois, one phrase was shouted all along the line - "If you think you're going to come here and rape all our women you'll be a dead nigger first." (p. 67 Why Black Power, Joseph R. Barndt)

It always comes out - this terrible hatred rooted in fear and spawned by guilt. The very phrase "Black Power" frightens us - and fuels our hatred - even though we live in a world of political and economic power. The late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. summarized it well: "A guilt ridden white minority fears that if the Negro attains power, he will without restraint and pity act to revenge the accumulated injustices and brutality of the years. A parent, who has continually mistreated his son, suddenly realizes that he is now taller than his parent. Will the son use his new physical power to repay for all the blows of the past?" (p. 139, Strength to Love)

Is the Gospel relevant here? It is - but only as Christian people put aside fear - and realize once again that love is powerful - that there is no fear in love - that not only our welfare but our survival, depend on someone breaking us out of the trap of fear in which we seem to be caught. I don't know anything more relevant than that.

But how? How can we love that much? How can we incarnate that perfect love which casts out all fear - which runs roughshod over all hatred and bitterness? "We love, because he first loved us." That's how. We can't do it alone - something like a miracle of grace has to happen to us. We need help - even in our loving.

But again, this is how it is with all men. We are not born with built-in love for all men. In fact, we are born with the equal capacity for love or hate. An infant loves when he learns to love himself; that is, when he experiences his own loveableness. A parent calls forth love within his child by extending his own love. Reuel Howe describes it well, "Only those who have been loved and who love themselves are free and able to love others. The ability to love is always theresult of having been loved. This is true of the child's relation to the parent, and it is true of our relation to God." (p. 82, Man's Need and God's Action)

All of us have read, or been told, that if we really love our children everything will be all right. And then we've had the sensitivity to see that our family tensions haveresulted from the fact that when our children really needed our love - i.e. when they were being unlovable, we have not given it. We have been unable to respond to unloveableness with unmerited love. We are very much inclined, even with our children, to love to the degree that they love us or earn our love. We need help - even in our loving. We need a miracle of grace - to become the kind of people we want to be.

We love, because he first loved us. God is love. God loves us- even as we are unlovcable. And that love - the recognition on our part that God's holy love is ours - frees us to become agents of love. We are enabled to love because we are loved. That is the good promise of the Gospel. That is the miracle of grace that keeps happening in our midst.

We have ranged widely this morning. Perhaps it would have been preferable to f cus. But love <u>is</u> A Many Splendored Thing - particularly the enabling loveof a Holy God - that casts out all fear.

Amen.